

EXILE

AND OTHER POEMS

RICHARD ALDINGTON

Limited Edition

Signed

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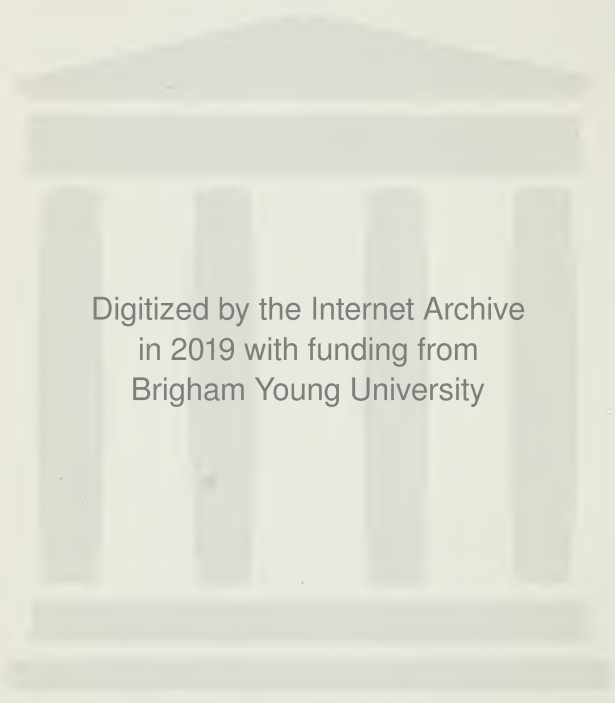
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EXILE

AND OTHER POEMS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IMAGES

IMAGES OF DESIRE

IMAGES OF WAR

LITERARY STUDIES AND
REVIEWS *(In preparation)*

EXILE

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

RICHARD ALDINGTON



*London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
Ruskin House, 40 Museum Street, W.C.1*

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*This Edition is limited to 750 copies,
of which 50 are signed by the Author.*

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No 40

Richard Aldington

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I

EXILE

Exile

"Do you dwell on the snowy promontory of Mimas?"

HOW shall we utter
This horror, this rage, this despair?
How shall we strike at baseness,
Cut through disgust with scorn?
How rend with slashed fingers
The bars and walls of the lives
Which blacken the air and pure light?

What are they? Alien, brutish,
Base seed of Earth's ravished womb.
Shall we yield our light and our truth—
The flash of the helm,
And the foam-grey eyes and the hair
Braided with gold,
Steel mail on a firm breast?
Shall we yield?

Their life, their truth?
O laugh of disdain!
If ours be a goddess
Chaste, proud, and remote,
What is theirs?
A boastful woman, a whore,
One greasy of flesh, stale
With hot musty perfume—
While ours—
Firm-fleshed as the treeless hills,
With her rigid breasts and hard thighs,
Cold and perfect and fresh—

Fields crisp with new frost—
Sets the violet-crown in her hair,
Turns an unstained brow to the sky.

Let us stand by the earth-shaking sea
Unfurrowed by a hull,
Let us move among beeches and oaks
Unprofaned by loud speech ;
Let us reverence the sacred earth
And the roar of unbridled falls
And the crash of an untamed sea.
Let us shade our eyes from the sun
And gaze through the leaves,
Far, most far—
Shall we see her hill
And the marble front of her house
And herself, standing calm,
Many-coloured, triumphant, austere ?

Eumenides

IT is at night one thinks,
At night, staring with sleepless eyes
At the narrow moonlit room.
Outside the owls hoot briefly,
And there are stars
Whose immortal order makes one shudder.

I do not need the ticking of my watch
To tell me I am mortal ;
I have lived with, fed upon death
As happier generations feed on life ;
My very mind seems gangrened.

What am I, lying here so still,
Staring till I almost see the silence ?
What am I ?
What obscure fragment of will ?
What paltry life cell ?

Have I not striven and striven for health ?
Lived calmly (as it seemed) these many months,
Walked daily among neat hedged fields,
Watched the long pageant of the clouds,
Loved, drawn into my being, flowers,
English flowers—the thin anemones,
The honey drops of tufted primroses,
Wild scented hyacinths, white stitchwort,
The spotted orchis, tall scentless violets,
Larch buds, green and scarlet,

Noted the springing green
Of white ash, birch and heavy oak,
Lived with the noblest books, the noblest friends,
Looked gay, laughed free, worked long?

I have done all this,
And yet there are always nights
I lie awake staring with sleepless eyes,
And what is my mind's sickness,
What the agony I struggle with,
I can hardly tell.

Loos, that horrible night in Hart's Crater,
The damp cellars of Maroc,
The frozen ghostly streets of Vermelles,
That first night-long gas bombardment—
O the thousand images I see
And struggle with and cannot kill—
That boot I kicked
(It had a mouldy foot in it)
The night K.'s head was smashed
Like a rotten pear by a mortar,
The other night I trod on the dead man
And all the officers were hit. . . .

These, like Eumenides, glide about me,
Fearful memories of despair and misery,
Tortured flesh, caked blood, endurance,
Men, men, and the roar of shells,
The hissing lights, red, green, yellow,
The clammy mud, the tortuous wire,
The slippery boards. . . .

It is all so stale,
It has been said a thousand times ;
Millions have seen it, been it, as I ;
Millions may be haunted by these spirits
As I am haunted ;
May feel, as I feel, in the darkness,
Their flesh dripping into corruption,
Their youth and love and gaiety
Dissolved, violently slain, annihilated.

What is it I agonize for ?
The dead ? They are quiet ;
They can have no complaint.
No, it is my own murdered self—
A self which had its passion for beauty,
Some moment's touch with immortality—
Violently slain, which rises up like a ghost
To torment my nights,
To pain me.

It is myself that is the Eumenides,
That will not be appeased, about my bed ;
It is the wrong that has been done me
Which none has atoned for, none repented of,
Which rises before me, demanding atonement.

Tell me, what answer shall I give my murdered self ?

Le Maudit

WOMEN'S tears are but water ;
The tears of men are blood.

He sits alone in the firelight
And on either side drifts by
Sleep, like a torrent whirling,
Profound, wrinkled, and dumb.

Circuitously, stealthily,
Dawn occupies the city ;
As if the seasons knew of his grief,
Spring has suddenly changed into snow.

Disaster and sorrow
Have made him their pet ;
He cannot escape their accursed embraces.
For all his dodgings
Memory will lacerate him.

What good does it do to wander
Night hours through city streets ?
Only that in poor places
He can be with common men
And receive their unspoken
Instinctive sympathy.
What has life done for him ?
He stands alone in the darkness
Like a sentry never relieved,
Looking over a barren space,
Awaiting the tardy finish.

Bones

NOW when this coloured curious web
Which hides my awkward bones from sight
Unrolls, and when the thing that's I—
A pinch of lighted dust that flashes—
Has somehow suddenly gone out,
What quaint adventures may there be
For my unneeded skeleton?

Some men's bones are left (like trees
Which cannot move from where they root)
On open hills or low damp hollows,
Wherever war has struck them down;
And some bones after many years
A waggish bomb digs up, and strews—
Thighbones and ribs mixed up with coffins—
About a well bombarded town;
And some are plunged with ancient wreckage
Where fishes with blue bulging eyes
Slide past, and clouds of tiniest shells
In ages make a rocky cover;
And some lie here and some lie there
Until they moulder quite away,
Some in the village garth and some
In quiet suburban labelled rows,
And some are powdered up in fire
And some are shown in dull museums. . . .

Now, while his flesh remains, a man
Is something; but who feels akin
To any nameless poor old bones?
Even she, who with miraculous lips

Set little flowering plots of kisses
Over our body, will not care
To hug us when our bones are dry ;
And she who carried us nine months
And built them with her vital blood
Might pass them by and never know
These were the bones so hard to bear ;
And, likelier still, our dearest child
Would scorn to know us so unveiled,
Unwilling to believe his flesh,
Still firm and petal-sweet, was bred
By such a pitiful old wreck.

But, in the end, the bones go too,
And drift about as dust which hangs
In a long sun-shaft, or dissolve
Into the air to help build up
The pulpy tissues of fine leaves
Or heavier flakes of ruddy flesh,
Or even someone else's bones.

I leave to those superior minds
Who make theology their care
The task of settling whose shall be
These much-used frameworks at the last ;
I rather see a wearier world
Shed, æons hence, its comely flesh
To dance, a mournful skeleton,
Sedately round a dingier sun.

Meditation

AS I sit here alone in the calm lamplight,
Watching the red embers
Slowly fade and crumble into grey dust,
With that impenetrable silence
Of long night about me
And the companionship of the immemorial dead
At hand upon my shelves,
Then, when I have freed myself
From trivial designs and false longings,
When I have fortified my soul
To endure the rough shock of truth,
Then I can think without trembling or whimpering
That I must see you dead,
That I must press down your useless eyelids,
Extend your arms, smooth down your hair,
And set upon your lips a withered flower,
The poor last kiss.

In the imagination
I have endured all that without a tear ;
Yet, if it were not that above all things
I seek and cling to my own truth,
I would cozen my agony with any lie,
Any far-fetched similitude, any dream
Which would lighten with hope this heavy certitude ;
I would kiss the feet of man or woman
Who would prove to me your immortality,
Prove to me your new life circles this life
As the immense sky, naked and starry,
Circles with its illimitable round
The low white roof of our cottage.

Yet, as I would not catch your love with a lie,
But force you to love me as I am,
Faulty, imperfect, human,
So I would not cheat your inward being
With untrue hopes nor confuse pure truth with a legend.
This only I have :
I am true to my truth, I have not faltered ;
And my own end, the sudden departure
From the virile earth I love so eagerly,
Once such a sombre matter, now appears nothing
Beside this weightier, more torturing bereavement.

In the Palace Garden

THE yews became a part of me,
The long walks edged with sparse flowers,
The fluttering green fringes of elm leaves
Blurring the washed blue sky,
The long shivering ripples of the river,
Bird-calls, all we saw and did,
Became me, built me up,
Helped me to love you.
I was happy.
It was enough not to be dead,
Not to be a black spongy mass of decay
Half-buried on the edge of a trench,
More than enough to be young and gay,
To know my lips were such
Yours would be glad to meet them.
I loved you with my old miseries
Which were no longer miseries,
With the scent of the lilacs
And the softly sprinkling fountain,
And the kind glances of passers.
How did it happen then?
The sun did not cease shining,
The water rippled just as fleetly,
I loved you just as indiscreetly—
But gradually my golden mood tarnished,
Happiness hissed into nothing—
Metal under a fierce acid—
And I was whispering :
“ This happiness is not yours ;
It is stolen from other men.
Coward ! You have shirked your fate.”

Epitaph in Ballade Form

WHICH VILLON MADE FOR HIMSELF AND HIS
FRIENDS, WAITING TO BE HANGED WITH THEM

BROTHERS among men who after us shall live,
Let not your hearts' disdain against us rise,
For if some pity for our woe ye have,
The sooner God your pardon shall devise.
Behold, here five or six of us we peise ;
As to our flesh, which we fed wantonly,
Rotten, devoured, it hangeth mournfully ;
And we, the bones, to dust and ash are riven,
Let none make scorn of our infirmity,
But pray to God that all we be forgiven.

If, brothers, we cry out, ye should not give
Disdain for answer, even if justice 'tis
That murders us. This thing ye should believe,
That always all men are not wholly wise ;
Pray often for us then, not once or twice,
Before the fair son of the Virgin Mary,
Lest that—for us—his grace prove injury
And we beneath the lord of hell be driven.
Now we are dead, cease importunity
And pray to God that all we be forgiven.

The rain doth weaken all our strength and lave
Us, the sun blackens us again and dries ;
Our eyes the ravens hollow like a grave ;
Our beards and eyebrows are plucked off by pies.
Never rest comes to us in any wise ;
Now here, now there, as the wind sways, sway we,

Swung at the wind's high pleasure ceaselessly,
More pecked by birds than hazel nuts that ripen.
Be ye not then of our fraternity,
But pray to God that all we be forgiven.

ENVOI.

Prince Jesus, above all hast mastery,
Let not high hell become our seignury;
There we have nought to do nor order even.
Brothers, keep here no thought of mockery,
But pray to God that all we be forgiven.

At a Gate by the Way

STAND here a moment, friend,
And look across the silent garnered fields ;
See how they turn like huge-limbed country
gods,

Their labour ended, to a solemn rest—
A rest so like to death that if they think
Their thoughts are those that are befitting death.
With them is peace,
Peace of bland misty skies and hushed winds
Steadily whispering comfort above them,
Peace of the slowly-rising tranquil moon,
Peace of the sombre woods whose leaves,
Heavily drooping, pine but fall not yet ;
Peace that the fruit is plucked, the wheatstalks shorn,
And entered all the increase of the year,
Peace, humble but august.

Would you not joy to share in such a mood,
The long task fitly ended, peace at heart,
Under such skies, at such an hour as this ?

O friend, why is it that the fields have peace
And we have none ? I press my hands
Softly against my aching eyes and feel
How hot they are with scanning many books ;
My brain is dry with thoughts of many men,
My heart is faint with deaths of many gods.
I know I live only because I suffer.
I know of truth only because I seek,
Only because I need it know I love.

Hunters of truth and wisdom !
O friend, who sped that bitter speech ?
What soft-tongued foe whispered that dear deceit ?
We have hunted, you and I, these many years ;
Either the game is scant, the luck is thwart,
Or we are mole-eyed or the gods are cruel,
For what we seized breathless with joy
Turned rotten in our hands and what we missed
Seemed ever the one quarry that we sought.

No need to answer. I know, I know
All you would say ; I know our search
Is nobler than the common tumult ;
We are nearer the gods than those who run and fly.
The shadows we pursue may not be shadows,
The dreams we live with may be more than dreams. . . .
All this I hope ; but when the autumn comes
And heavy carts sway loaded to the barns,
And swallows gather to be gone and rooks
Flock to the fields for scattered grain,
O friend, I am filled with musing and distrust,
So poor my harvest to this golden wealth,
So teased my spirit to this opulent peace.

Come, what were you saying of Lucretius ?

Rhapsody in a Third-Class Carriage

DEADNESS of English winter, dreariness,
cold sky over provincial towns, mist.
Melancholy of undulating trams
solitary jangling through muddy streets,
narrowness, imperfection, dullness,
black extinguisher over English towns ;
mediocre women in dull clothes—
their nudity a disaster—
heavy cunning men (guts and passbooks),
relics of gentry, workmen on bicycles,
puffy small whores, baby carriages,
shops, newspapers, bets, cinemas, allotments. . . .

These are your blood ; their begetters
made in the same bed as yours
(horror of copulation),
colossal promiscuity of flesh through centuries
(seed and cemeteries).

Sculptor ! show Mars
bloody in gas-lit abattoirs,
Apollo organist of Saint Mary's,
Venus of High Street, Athena,
worshipped at National schools.
Painter ! there are beets in allotments,
embankments, coal-yards, villas, grease,
interpret the music orchestra,
trams, trains, cars, hobnails, factories—
O poet ! chant them to the pianola,
to the metronome in faultless verse. . . .

Freedom

AT last, after years, I am saturated
With pity and agony and tears ;
At last I have reached indifference ;
Now I am almost free—
A gold pellet of sunlight
Dropped, curdling, into green water.

The grass, which is one with our flesh
And bends like an old man
Back to the mould, their mother,
Beckons with long fingers
The poplar nymphs and white ash dryads
To caress their white feet dancing,
Weightless, pale, and immortal.

The dead may be myriad,
But my nostrils are sweet with crushed leaves,
My eyes clear as flowers,
My hands stainless ;
About me is opulent light
That drenches the lightless sea,
Piercing shadowy windless places
Where sea-moss fringes quiet pebbles.

Over harsh slopes the centaurs gallop
With whistling manes, a rattle of hoofs ;
White shapes rustle the dew-dripping thickets
Slim fauns dance by the grass track.
I have passed through hate and pity,
Desire and anguish, to this :
I am myself,
I am free.

Retreat

LET there be silence sometimes,
A space of starless night—
A silence, a space of forgetfulness
Away from seething of lives,
The rage of struggle.

Let there be a time of retreat,
A hiding of the sun and all colours,
For the soul to ride at ease in darkness ;
For the coldness of no-life
To soothe life's burning.

Let there be rest
For wearied eyes to ease their labour
And wander across great distances,
For the spirit to slip the chain of hours
And drift in Atlantic waves of time.

Grant peace ;
For a space let there be no roar
Of wheels and voices, no din
Of steel and stone and fire.
Let us cleanse ourselves from the sweat and dirt,
Let us be hushed, let us breathe
The cold sterile wind from colourless space.

Having Seen Men Killed . . .

WHEN by chance
As I turn up the brow of the hill,
At a glance
I perceive there's a new grave to fill,
And I see all the poor apparatus of death—

The straight hole
And the planks and the lowering rope ;
And the toll
Of the bell and the mirage of hope
In the words
Duly mumbled for those that remain—

Then I smile
“ Fine morning,” nod to the sexton's nod,
For a while
Wonder if Einstein proves or disproves God,
But how soon
Find myself cheerfully humming a tune.

Nightingale

NIGHT winds beat my naked flesh,
Waves of air rush over me.
The young moon stands among frozen clouds ;
Far off as death burn the ice-sparkles which are stars.
A wall of rough black pine
Cuts the pale sky.

Your voice—
Ah, chastest, coldest thing !
The brief shrill clang of ice on glass,
The note of fragile metal sharply struck,
The lapse of waters.
Ah, virginal delight !
The woods hold you
And the boughs frozen with dew.

This is no love-song,
No breath of wine and summer flowers,
No murmur of desire ;
But such a hymn,
Fierce, lonely, and untamed,
As the Trœzenian hunter sang
Before the marble shrine.

So wild a song once rose
From the women of Artemis
In some cold hidden valley
Where trees sombrely ringed
A black lake and cold mist glided
As the first moonrays
Glittered through clouds.

These foam-frail girls
Greek sailors saw beyond their prows,
Whose flesh was cooled by the waves' heart,
Whose veins ran spray of the storm,
Sang this song
As dawn stood grey on the sea's rim.

But this is no love-song,
No echo of kisses.

Papillons

(BALLET RUSSE)

WHAT phantasm of the heart of men
So whitely and so wanly
Gibes at us ?

Fool !
Had your heart the warmth
That burns in the thin candle-heart,
You had not lost her.

White—
As one who trembles at her gold scorn—
You ask for treachery.

Be red, be blood-red, brother,
And she'll not dare
To dance to other colder lips than yours !

Truth

TRUTH! if my words grow wan and cold
The fault is yours.
Yet what a fool was I,
Like the farm zany in the nursery tale,
To barter a full bag of coined fancies
For your lean script of verities.
What a mouldy cheat was this!
Truth, I suspect your dwelling-place
Is round about old graves and wormy tombs
Inscribed "Cras tibi, hodie mihi";
I never met you at a kindly feast
Or with a friend before a blazing fire
Or walking in the sunshine as I sang.
But books, books—cursed croaking sirens—
Written by old men moping at their aches,
Or young men skilled in acids and despair,
Vaunted you, described you,
Offered to impart you for a fee.

There are fools and fools.
Gay fools whose hours pass merrily
And solemn, nasty fools
Whose dismal witchcraft
Makes pigsties of our marriage-beds,
Schedules the spring,
Cuts flowers in zinc,
Turns wine to ink,
Lops poor Puck's wing.

O Satan! You've disguised yourself as Truth
And made a solemn fool of more than me;

But by these presents, firmly weighed and penned,
I here renounce you and your verminous tricks

Come, happy Falsehood,
Once again,
Make me a merry fool.

To Those who Played for Safety in Life

I ALSO might have worn starched cuffs,
Have gulped my morning meal in haste,
Have clothed myself in dismal stuffs
Which prove a sober City taste ;

I also might have rocked and craned
In undergrounds for daily news,
And watched my soul grow slowly stained
To middle-class unsightly hues. . . .

I might have earned ten pounds a week !

II

WORDS FOR MUSIC

Od's-life! must one swear to the truth of a
song?

PRIOR.

Songs for Puritans

I

SUFFER my too ambitious hand
To range these low delicious hills,
Invest me freedman of a land
Exile from which dejects and kills ;
With pious lips let me revere
The sacred roses cherished there.

I'll gather no more garlands now—
Mere bubbles of imperfect light—
Since in that secret country grow
Petals so delicate and light.
And when for love of flowers I pine,
My senses shall exult o'er thine.

II

UNLIKE that aged Teian boaster
And those who ape his senile lies,
I cannot show a monstrous roster
Of ladies captive to my eyes.

Yet five or six I might discover
(Did grateful prudence not restrain)
Who felt a pleasure-giving lover
Should not be cut, but come again.

If this were ill, may they forgive me ;
They never seemed to take alarm ;
Whate'er John Wesley says, believe me,
Women know best what does them harm.

III

EUPHEMIA studies law, Aminta
 Inspects the ailments of the poor,
 Eudocia prays and Araminta
 Numbers the stars on heaven's floor ;
Yet Chloe for my mistress I decree,
Whose only art is artless love of me.

'Tis not the statute binds together,
 Physic ignores the wounds we share,
Love works in dull or starry weather
 And nakedness suits not with prayer ;
Then let your learning, Chloe, still consist
In all the various ways of being kist.

IV

BELIEVE not, Chloe, all your grace
Can dwell within that lovely face,
Believe not all your beauty lies
In the mild prison of those eyes.

Yet, Chloe, think not I incline
To passions abstract and divine,
'Tis not a soul alone could move
This ardent flesh to sue for love.

But when that rose-tipped breast I see,
Or the white splendour of your knee,
I covet a more precious fleece
Than ever Jason brought to Greece.

V

WHEN to Dorinda I impart
 My passion,
 She vows the mistress of my heart
 Is fashion,
 That Celia, Chloe, and Lucinda
 Shall never rule with proud Dorinda.

I crave more beauties than do stir
 My vision ;
 For all reply she shows me her
 Derision.
 Must I then suffer this, a martyr
 That dares not rise above her garter ?

If she persists a prude, I swear
 I'll leave her
 Till some chaste, clumsy cuckold dare
 Relieve her ;
 As heavy guns take virgin trenches,
 So husbands smoothe our way to wenches.

VI

P*ULVIS et umbra!* Chloe, why
Quench my desire with ill-bred gloom,
Since many an amorous death we die
Ere we are borne to lie
Loveless and chilly in th'uncomely tomb?

Why, pretty fool, is that a tear
Wronging the cheek I kissed so late?
There is no dust nor shadow here;
Come, kiss me without fear,
And let me bring you to the ivory gate.

VII

DAPHNIS, pray breathe this pastoral vein ;
Strew not my broidered sheets with flowers
Dripping cold rain ;
Can any civil maid embrace
Daffodils dropped in freezing showers
That soil her lace ?
Be (if you choose) a poet, but
Expect to find my window shut ;
Though Chloe loves whene'er she can,
She loves no pseudo-shepherd-man.

VIII

CHLOE, the gods are too remote
From this unruly cloud-wrapped ball,
Too tranquil, as the rose-leaves float
On wine-cups in th'Olympian hall,
To keep a watch on you and me
And frown at lost virginity.

The rose must shed its fragile flower
Before the slim red fruit appears,
Unloose your garments like a shower
Of falling petals, quit your fears,
And suffer my religious hand
To pluck the fruit no eye has scanned.

IX

O REVEREND sir, cease to upbraid
A simple man who lives by reason,
Who never tried to thwart your trade
By dull invectives out of season :

Desist, then, from your dreary labour ;
I know the errors of my life ;
But, though I do not love my neighbour,
How often have I loved his wife !

X

SIR PIOUS, pray you hide your eyes ;
By all the saints ! you shall not look ;
For yonder where the sunshine lies
Chloe is bathing in the brook :

Chloe is bathing in the brook
And glads a pagan sight like mine ;
But you, Sir Pious, con your book
And learn that pearls are not for swine.

Songs for Sensualists

A SOPHISTRY OF DURATION

TELL me not beauty dies like dew
The envious sun draws trembling up,
Nor liken hers to that brief hue
Flushes the rose's tender cup—
For things like her so lovely are
They should outlive the bravest star.

If all my senses still conspire,
Ere their meridian be past,
To set the blossoms of desire,
The worm shall not exult at last ;
Her children and my words I trust
Shall speak her grace when we are dust.

A GARDEN HOMILY

COME, thrust your hands in the warm earth
And feel her strength through all your veins,
Breathe her full odours, taste her mirth
That laughs away imagined pains.
Touch here life's very womb, but know
This substance makes your grave also.

Shrink not ; your flesh is no more sweet
Than flowers which daily blow and die ;
Nor are your mien and dress so neat ;
Nor half so pure your lucid eye.
And yet—by flowers and earth I swear
You're neat and pure and sweet and fair.

WORDS FOR MUSIC

GO tell the shepherd's star, when first
The evening fans her spark awake,
That light is murderous and accurst—
But say not Delia faith can break.

Tell the wild rose, when tranquil days
Have charmed a thousand petals wide,
To-morrow scatters all her praise—
But say not Delia's kisses lied.

Swear anything that's monstrous, swear
That truth is a fantastic lie,
Take oath that Delia is not fair—
But, oh! that she is false, deny.

MADRIGAL

O H, by what right shall I upbraid
Beauty that will not let me rest?
What charm shall make to fade
Those cheeks as fragrantly demure as morn
And quench the perfume of her flowering breast?
All night I waked forlorn,
I waked forlorn,
Harkening the lamentation of the rain,
But daylight brought no slumber to my pain,
no slumber to my pain.

FROM TASSO

DANCE OF AIR SPIRITS.

WE are those unseen forms that fly
Hither and thither in the sky,
Our home the eternal crystalline
Wide spaces of the pure serene
Where wandering breezes gently stray
And no sun brings too hot a day
And there is never wintry weather
To chill us as we dance together ;
Now fate and heavenly grace have brought us
To the sight of you who sought us,
Down we glided from the air,
Young and blithe and light and fair,
To teach you how aërial sprites
Gambol in the starry nights,
To rouse your dull and mortal ears
With the music of the spheres.

Metrical Exercises

THE BERKSHIRE KENNET

Amongst his hills and holts, as on his way he makes,
At Reading once arrived, clear Kennet overtakes
His lord, the stately Thames. . . .

Drayton's Polyolbion.

TURN from the city's poisoned air
And dwell with me a little where
The Kennet, gently flowing, speeds
His scent of green and bruised reeds
And water-mints that root in mud,
Cordial and faint; or where his flood
Breaks in a low perpetual roar
Beneath the weir, abrupt and hoar
With ragged foam and trembling spray
Whose perfume damps the hottest day
With cool invisible sweet breath.

Old willows, stout, but near their death,
In winter wave their naked boughs
Beside the stream that roughly ploughs
The loose earth from their roots; in spring
Winds lighter than the swallow's wing
Touch their pale fluttering leaves which throw
A green light on the stream below.
The water-meadows, cool and lush,
Fringed with the ragged hawthorn bush,
Bear lonely elms with shaggy stems—
Green petticoats with ruffled hems—
And oaks in distant clumps, as round
As Latin domes, and poplars sound

And tall as Lombard bell-towers, and
Long aspen screens on either hand.

And all the river's way is lined
With broad reeds rustling in the wind,
And flowers that bend as if they gave
Farewells to every passing wave—
Tall meadow-sweet spreads out as stiff
As Queen Anne's pocket-handkerchief ;
And amid willow-herb the sprays
Of loosestrife gold or purple blaze ;
And August sees the guelder-rose
Hung with her clustered fruit that glows
Robust and crimson, where in June
Gleamed whiter than the ashen moon
The cold and delicate flowers that shine
Upon the thorny eglantine.
And far across the fields and marsh
The peewit clamours shrill and harsh,
Or—out of sight he wings so high—
The snipe falls drumming from the sky,
Or wary redshanks flit and flute
Clear notes to hush their young brood mute.

O solitude, O innocent peace,
Silence, more precious than the Fleece
That Jason and his fellows sought,
Our greatest riches though unbought,
And hard to find and ill to praise
In noisy and mechanic days !
Yet in these humble meadows they
Have cleansed the wounds of war away,

And brought to my long troubled mind
The health that I despaired to find,
And, while their touch erased the pain,
Breathed the old raptures back again
And in their kindness gave to me
Almost that vanished purity.

Here where the osiers barely sigh
Hour upon hour still let me lie,
Where neither cannon roar nor noise
Of heavy wheels my ear annoys,
And there is none my face to scan
Save some incurious countryman ;
And in my cool and hushed nook
I read some old and gentle book
Until in thought I lift my eyes
To rest on dappled English skies,
And hear the stream go murmuring by
And watch the bubbling eddies fly
As Kennet's waters glide for ever
To wed the elder, nobler river. . . .

As on the verge of sleep I nod
I see the ancient river god
Lean on his smooth and polished urn ;
His hair is twined with rush and fern
And in his beard are waving reeds
And in his hand are lily seeds.
Ever the marble urn expels
Cool water, pure as that which wells
From some untainted northern hill ;
Ever his languid hands do spill

The flowers that nod and dip and smile
Along his banks mile upon mile,
Nor ever do his green eyes shun
The glances of his grateful son.

And if I now invoke him here,
What supercilious lip dare sneer,
What heart that never loved the earth
Dare turn my piety to mirth,
And what vile truckler to the crowd
Scorn me, who live remote and proud?
Then, noble river, take my praise
And grant me more such happy days,
Each evening bring untroubled sleep
As your own waters still and deep,
And let my wealth be more or less,
So it suffice for happiness,
And keep in my untroubled life
The kindness of a comely wife,
And let the years I have been lent
Bring me not fame but sweet content,
And when my days run out and I
Must go, then teach me how to die,
To leave my well-loved solitude
For an enduring quietude.

A WINTER NIGHT

NOW the calm acres where I lay
Through half a murmurous summer's day,
Nodding in these drowsy meads
To the curtseying of the reeds,
Are drenched and mournful, harsh and wild.
Hostile to his late spoil'd child,
The turbid river seems to sulk
And hoarsely pours his swollen bulk ;
Blind with swirling leaves, the year
Dreads the mort-sheet drawing near,
Cowering hides his frosted head
And mourns his April splendours fled.
The pattering rain falls loud and thick,
Quelling the old clock's gentle tick ;
The tossing willows hiss and creak
As if long anguish forced them speak
And curse the loud tormenting gale ;
And as their branches groan and wail,
The ivy taps the latticed pane ;
The wind howls ; and it taps again.

“ Clap-to the doors, to-morrow pray ” ;
To-night be given to mirth and play ;
Shut out the wind, shut out the cold,
Shut out the world that's mean and old,
Shut out its madness, but admit
Beauty and memory and wit.

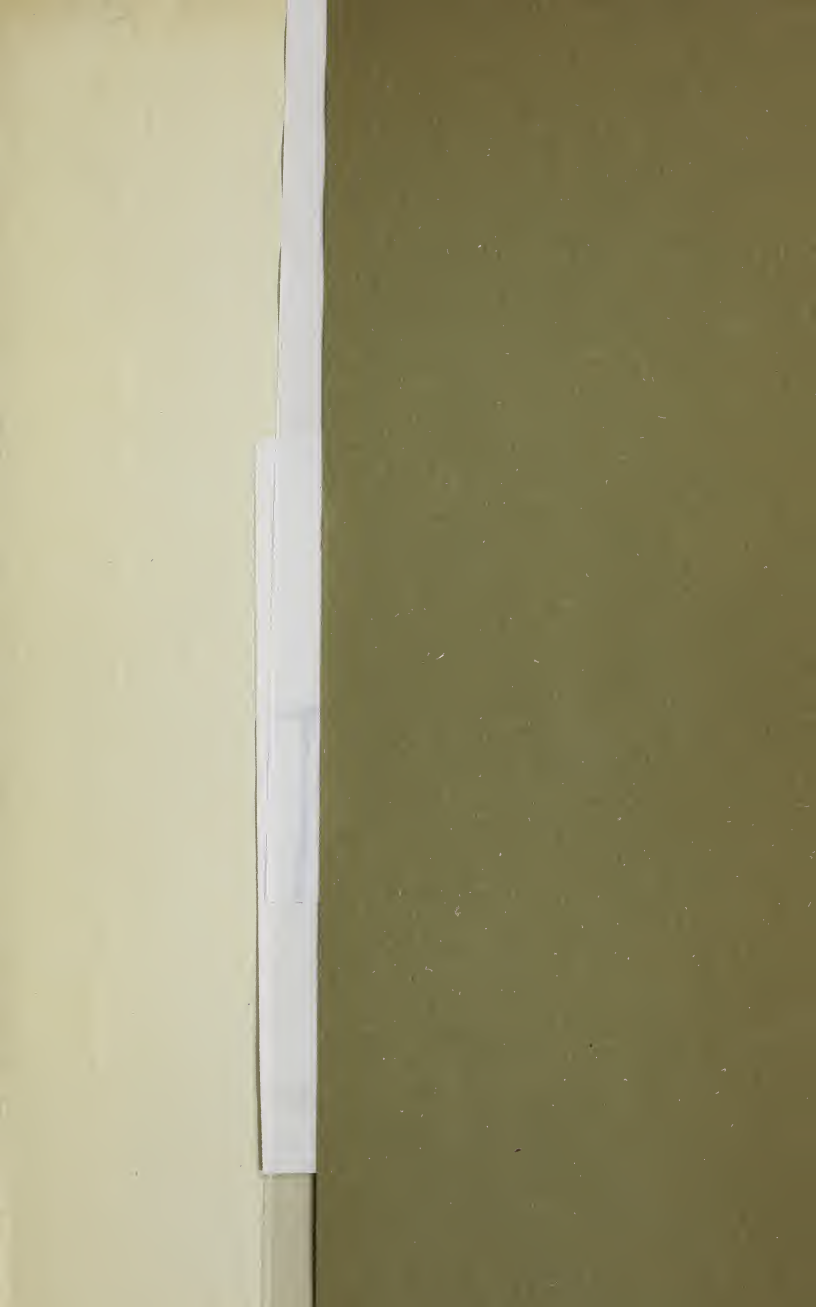
What glowing spirits deign to dwell
Here in this narrow low-pitch'd cell,

What stately pleasures I command
With all Eliza's wits at hand !
And how it charms my amorous looks
To see such ranks of noble books—
For some sweet god to ease man's curse
Gave him the gift of choice old verse ;
And those whom dull rich men despise
Taste real revenge by growing wise :
Thus even in hell they ease their pain
With Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Montaigne.

Then let me sit and entertain
The fancies that invest my brain,
That wheel and flutter hour by hour
Like moths about a campion flower
On heavy dewless nights of May ;
And let them poise and wheel and play,
Fan their pattern'd wings, then soar
To the haunts they kept before,
Leaving in my mind and heart
Coloured dust as they depart. . . .

And if I tell these fancies ? Then
I should be scorn'd by stupid men ;
Too well I know both friends and foes
Ever to let my heart uncloze,
Ever to give what I should keep
A secret to myself and Sleep.
What ! give again, as I have given,
Things sacred sent to me from heaven ?
No ! though my outward life be rude
It keeps the grace of solitude ;

No wealthy fool, no titled whore
Passes this quiet cottage door,
No noisy flatterer of the mob
Warms by my Spartan chimney hob !
But O you distant gods that dwell
Somewhere in earth or heaven or hell,
Turn for a moment from his betters
To hear a proud poor man of letters :
Grant that by toil which flatters none
I earn my needs, and that toil done,
Grant me to live still undisturbed ;
Keep this proud spirit yet uncurbed ;
Leave me my books and peace and health
And heavier wits may plod for wealth ;
Let me ne'er lose an honest friend
And keep me free until the end.



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